

PÉPÉ was the *Saddest* Bird



by William Stone

illustrated by Nicolas Mordvinoff

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RIBBY







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the *Saddest Bird*



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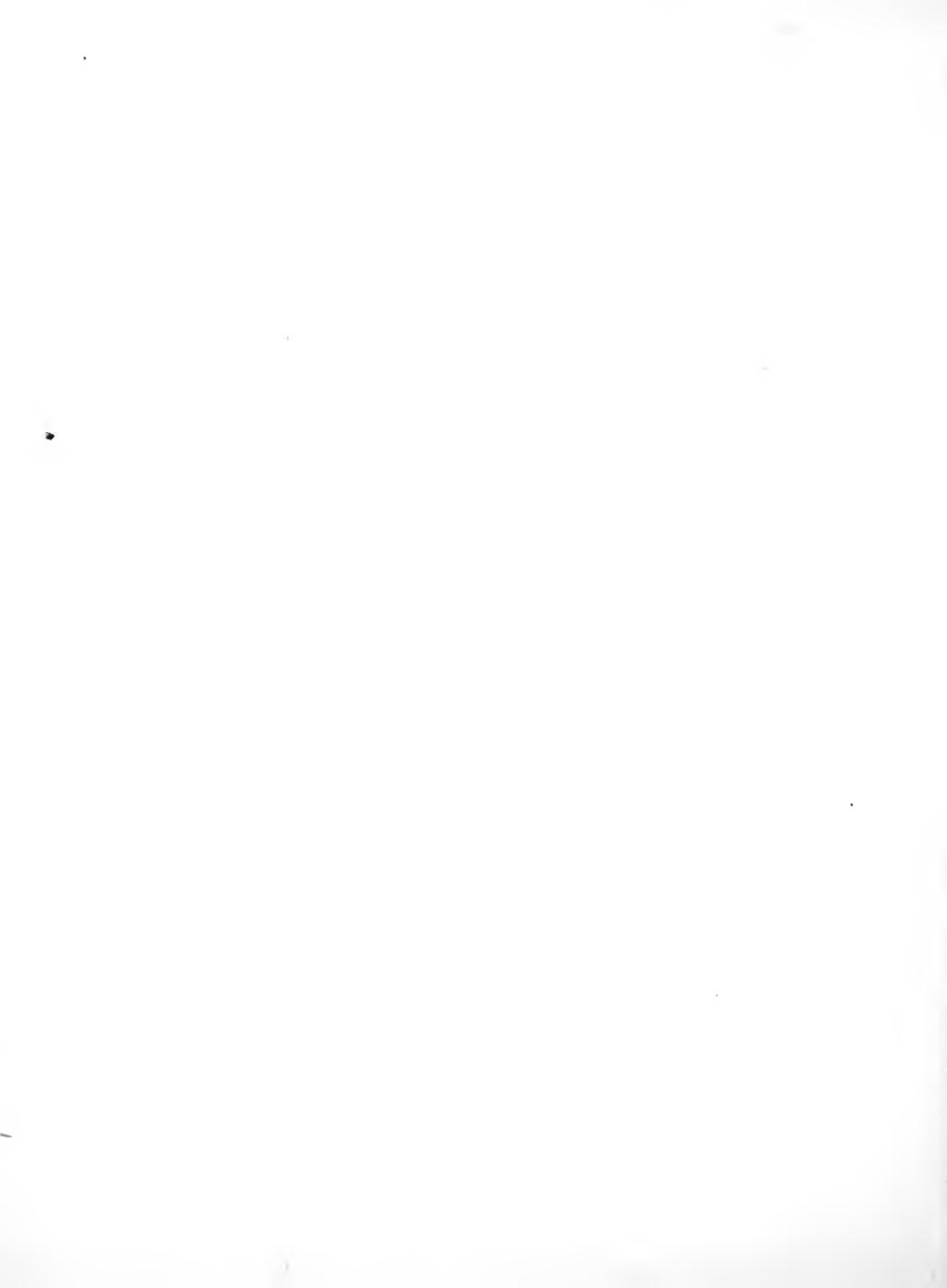
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FIRST EDITION

For
Colette Marie Yvonne Bruvry





It began, as often happens, with an egg and the egg belonged to two myna birds who lived in a mango tree on a small tropical island. The egg was in a nest up in the tree and the two birds who were responsible for it were standing on the edge of the nest looking at it. They stared at the egg and, although no one knew it yet, the egg was Pépé. It lay between two other eggs which were quite ordinary. But the egg which was Pépé was not at all ordinary. The father bird had never seen one like it and probably nobody else had either. Papa was a bird who had always liked to believe in an ordered world in which things happened according to certain laws that could be counted on. Now he didn't know.

"I think, mama," said he sternly, "that you are carrying originality a little far when you lay an egg like that."

The mother bird bent to polish her beak on her pretty yellow legs. Then she looked up. "It seems to me," she replied with an attempt at lightness, "a perfectly nice egg. Anyway, I didn't mean to."

Papa ruffled his black and brown feathers in some annoyance. "And since when," he demanded, "have myna birds' eggs come with a band about them as if someone had taken a pencil and drawn it there?"

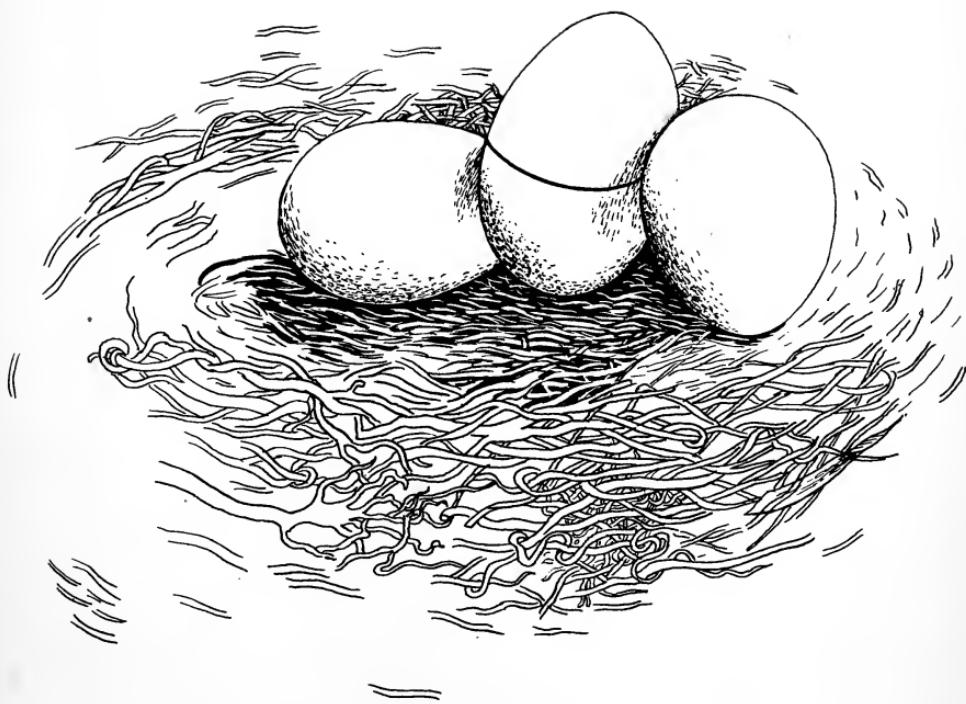
Mama had, as a matter of fact, been terribly upset when she first discovered the strange egg that she had laid but by now she had regained some of her composure and she only said, "Well, there is always a first time."

Papa was silent for a long while and finally mama asked uncertainly, "Shall I go ahead and sit on it?"

"Yes," papa decided after some thought, "you had better set."

"Sit, I said," she replied, "not set," and she sat.

This, from Pépé's point of view, was very fortunate.



The mother bird kept the three eggs warm for a good many days and all the while Pépé was right there in the middle, which was probably the most comfortable place to be. They were lovely days during which a gentle breeze blew in off the green lagoons rustling the leaves of the mango tree and causing the branches to sway pleasantly, yet it was a pretty stupid time for mama. She had nothing to do but sit there watching the silly bugs and things which buzzed around the ripening fruit. Occasionally papa would come to ask how she was getting on but then he would fly away and she would be alone again with the three eggs. And if there is anything more uninteresting and lacking in expression than three eggs (even if one of them has a band about it) no one has discovered it.



Once a mango fell onto the ground and tore away a little of the foliage so that mama was able to look into the house which was built close to the tree. She could see Tané and Vahiné inside. Tané and Vahiné were man and wife and they were natives of the island, which is to say they were born there. For this reason they had brown skins and round faces and kind hearts and lazy ways. Also they were quite fat. Sometimes they came out to feed their pig or to play with the cat or to chop open some coconuts and dig out the meat. Mostly they just sat smoking and talking in the doorway. To the mama myna they appeared no more amusing than the bugs but they were easier to keep an eye on and that is the way she whiled away the days.



Then, one morning very early when the sun had just risen — Pépé came out.

Mama jumped up quickly to make way for him and for his brother and sister who soon followed. Then she stared, unable to believe her eyes. It was a full minute before she managed to open her mouth and call, "Papa! Come quickly!"

Papa came flying as fast as he could and alighted on the edge of the nest. Mama looked at Pépé and then at her husband and then back at Pépé again. But papa looked only at Pépé, cocking his head to use first one eye and then the other. Either way he saw the same thing.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed when he could find his voice. "Have we . . . have we brought a little angel into the world?"

So it seemed. The three broken egg shells now looked exactly alike. But there was a *halo* floating over Pépé's small, bald head!

A halo, as you probably know, is a sort of ring or circle which hangs over one's head. It glows as if it might have phosphorous in it, or perhaps an electric battery, and attracts attention to itself. Halos are very rarely seen and then only on people who are



almost unbelievably good. Old men who have led very dull lives sometimes wear them, and now and then you will run into someone who thinks he has one when neither you nor anyone else can see it at all.

For human beings they usually come in sizes from one foot across on up. Pépé's, quite properly, was at first no bigger than the ring on your mother's finger. But it was very real and very bright and there was no getting away from it.

Pépé's brother and sister were just commonplace birds.

"Well," mama said at last, turning to her husband, "what are you waiting for, dear?"

Papa knew what she meant and he pulled himself together and went to find something to eat. He came back carrying a fine, juicy centipede and with his beak he gently brushed aside the halo in order to drop it in Pépé's mouth which was very wide and waiting. But each time papa raised his head to take aim the halo floated back to a spot directly over Pépé's upturned face. Papa was puzzled.

"Here," said mama, snatching the centipede. "How clumsy you are!" And she dropped it neatly through the halo into her child's mouth where it then travelled down his throat and finally came to rest in Pépé's



stomach. Mama smiled a little. But then she turned back to her mate and said again, "What are you waiting for, dear?" Papa understood; he flew off and got a worm. This went on a long time and it is the way life began for Pépé.

Pépé was perfectly happy for several days after his coming-out because he did not yet know that he was unlike other little birds. If he saw the halo at all he must have imagined that everybody came so equipped and that it was only intended to guide the beetles, ladybugs and other oddments into his mouth.

But one morning he noticed that his brother and sister had moved to the far edge of the nest and that they were looking at him and tittering.

"What is so funny?" Pépé asked. And those were the first words he ever spoke. His brother raised a wing on which there were not yet many feathers and pointed over Pépé's head. Then he covered his mouth and tittered louder than before.

"Well!" Pépé thought. "What foolish creatures they are!" And he tilted his head disdainfully high. In so doing he found himself staring directly at his halo and his expression changed to one of perplexed concern. No wonder his brother and sister had laughed at such a strange and unnecessary thing.



"Shoo!" said Pépé forcefully, and he beat his small wings and ducked his head. Then he looked up—and the halo was still there just where it was before. He shifted to one side and the halo followed. Pépé paused and a look of worry appeared on his little face; he felt like crying for his mother but he was ashamed to do that. Suddenly he rushed beneath his brother and sister with such force that he almost toppled them from the nest. The mother myna appeared just then and finding them all tangled up together she jumped in and separated them. She placed brother and sister on one side and Pépé on the other. And what do you suppose had become of the halo? It was still floating right over Pépé's head.

"You mustn't play so roughly," mama said, "or you will fall out before you have learned to fly."

Pépé was not interested in flying; he was interested only in the halo.

"Why," he asked, "am I not like other birds?"

"Because, darling," his mother answered sweetly, "you are so very, very good."

"Good?" said Pépé.

"Yes," she explained, "you will not shout and quarrel like other myna birds, nor will you steal things from Tané and Vahiné's house and fly away with them."

"Why?" Pépé inquired.

"Because you have a halo."

"But I don't want a halo," Pépé said.

"Well," she told him a bit sharply, "there is nothing you can do about it; some people just have goodness thrust upon them!"

Quite a large colony of myna birds lived in the same mango tree which Pépé's mother and father had chosen for their home. And while Pépé was still in the nest many of them came to see him. They would sit on the branches round about and even on the edge of the nest itself staring at poor Pépé for hours on end. Pépé was terribly embarrassed at all this attention and he would often hide his head under his wing but he always knew that no matter what he did the halo was there shining and sparkling in the sunlight.

It was still worse when he first began to fly. On a certain morning his mother, without any warning at all, pushed him out of the nest so that Pépé was obliged to flap his wings and fly in order not to fall down. He managed to get as far as the yard in front of Tané and Vahiné's house before his feet touched the ground. Here he found many myna birds he had never seen before and even as he was trying to catch his breath still others arrived. The word seemed to have got around all over the island that Pépé was at last out of the nest where he could be properly examined and soon the sky was dark with birds who came flying from every direction. They alighted in Tané's front yard and formed a huge circle about Pépé who stood all alone



in the middle doing his best to keep back the tears. Heaven knows how long this would have gone on if it had not happened that both Tané and his wife were sitting in the doorway.

It was a warm day and Tané had been drinking a lot of orange beer to keep cool. He had a bottle in his hand when he glanced up and saw Pépé surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of chirping birds. Tané put the bottle quickly aside as if he had decided he had had more than enough. Then he rubbed his plump brown hand over his eyes and looked once more. Suddenly he grasped his wife.

"Do you see what I see, Vahiné?"

Vahiné had been dozing a little but now she opened her eyes and then her mouth. "Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "It is a little angel!" Which was just what Pépé's own father had first said. "But how bashful he looks," she added. "I am afraid he is not happy."

Of course Vahiné was right. There was not such an unhappy little bird in all the world as was Pépé just then and he stood with downcast eyes not knowing what to do next. He wished he were back in the nest where he could hide but he did not dare to try to fly there because he was not yet skillful at it and the



other birds would surely laugh more than ever. Besides it was uphill. If he could only cross the big empty circle and mingle with his fellows and lose himself among them! But Pépé knew he could never lose himself. Because of his halo he would always stand out in any company. He felt very miserable.

"Perhaps," said Vahiné to her husband, "the





reason he looks so sad is that he is hungry. Go and chase away all those noisy birds, Tané, and bring the little dear to me. I will get him some grated coconut."

While his wife went for the coconut Tané took a towel and waved it at the other birds till they were all gone. Then he picked Pépé up most carefully and carried him to the window sill where Pépé perched.

Vahiné held out her hand filled with coconut and, for politeness' sake, Pépé ate a little of it.

"Why do you suppose he is wearing that ring above his head?" Tané asked.

"It's because he is so very, very good. Isn't it, my little pet?" And Vahiné stroked the halo tenderly.

Pépé just pouted and said nothing. He wished they'd understand this halo business was none of his doing.

Things did not improve for Pépé as time went on. Wherever he went a flock of birds followed. They always stayed at some distance but he could hear their laughter and their exclamations at his unusual appearance. He tried to walk with his head up, looking straight before him as though he did not notice them but all the time he was wishing very hard that he could play with them. Fledglings of his own age never came near him. Neither did the older birds. And if the truth be told even his parents were a little self-conscious when out walking with him. Pépé was so conspicuous. Yet inside him his feelings were like those of other birds. He wanted to join the rest when they stood



about in groups all talking at the top of their lungs and no one listening to anyone but himself; he wanted to join when they were flying about, dipping and swooping this way and that with small sticks or bits of wastepaper in their mouths; he would have loved to jump into one of the free-for-alls when a half dozen or more would fight together while the feathers flew and excited squawks and shrieks filled the air. But he never had a chance.

Not even Tané's big, grey cat would chase him. When this cat, whose name was Mimi, first saw Pépé he crouched low and started to creep slowly toward him licking his chops. Pépé pretended not to be watching and his little heart beat happily. Now, he thought, I shall have someone to play with! He would wait till Mimi was almost upon him, then he would fly up and over Mimi's head and light again farther off. Then Mimi would turn and it would all start over. That was the way Tané's cat always did with the other birds. But it did not happen so with Pépé. Mimi was pretty old and his eyesight was not too good but when he had crept to within ten feet of Pépé he suddenly saw him as he was. Mimi's head twisted way over to one side and his long tail shot upright to form a big question mark. Slowly he got up off his belly and shook



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himself once or twice as if to make sure he was awake; he raised his hind paw and scratched his ear. "Dear me," he seemed to say to himself, "this is no myna bird after all!" He turned and walked away leaving Pépé sadder than ever.

Pépé heaved a great sigh and went on about his business. But he didn't have any business, really, because most of the things myna birds do are rather foolish and sometimes naughty, and Pépé never got a chance at any of them. He didn't even catch wasps unless he was extremely hungry, and then he ate only a few very small ones when no one was looking. Often he could be seen wandering disconsolately in the rain with no umbrella save his impractical halo.

Pépé almost wished he had never been hatched.

"What he needs," his mother said to her husband, "is to get it off his mind." She meant Pépé's halo, of course. But what was he to do when it was suspended there right over the place where one's mind is supposed to be?

However, papa suggested: "Maybe travel would help." Travel, as you may have heard, does sometimes take things off people's minds but it was very



doubtful if it could remove a halo. Pépé's parents decided to try it just the same because, as things stood, it was clear that life was proving very difficult for him.

"We must find Fati," mama said, "and arrange for Pépé's passage."

"And we must find Pépé," said papa.

They flew down from the mango tree in which they had been talking and soon found Pépé standing dolefully in the shade of a large pumpkin.

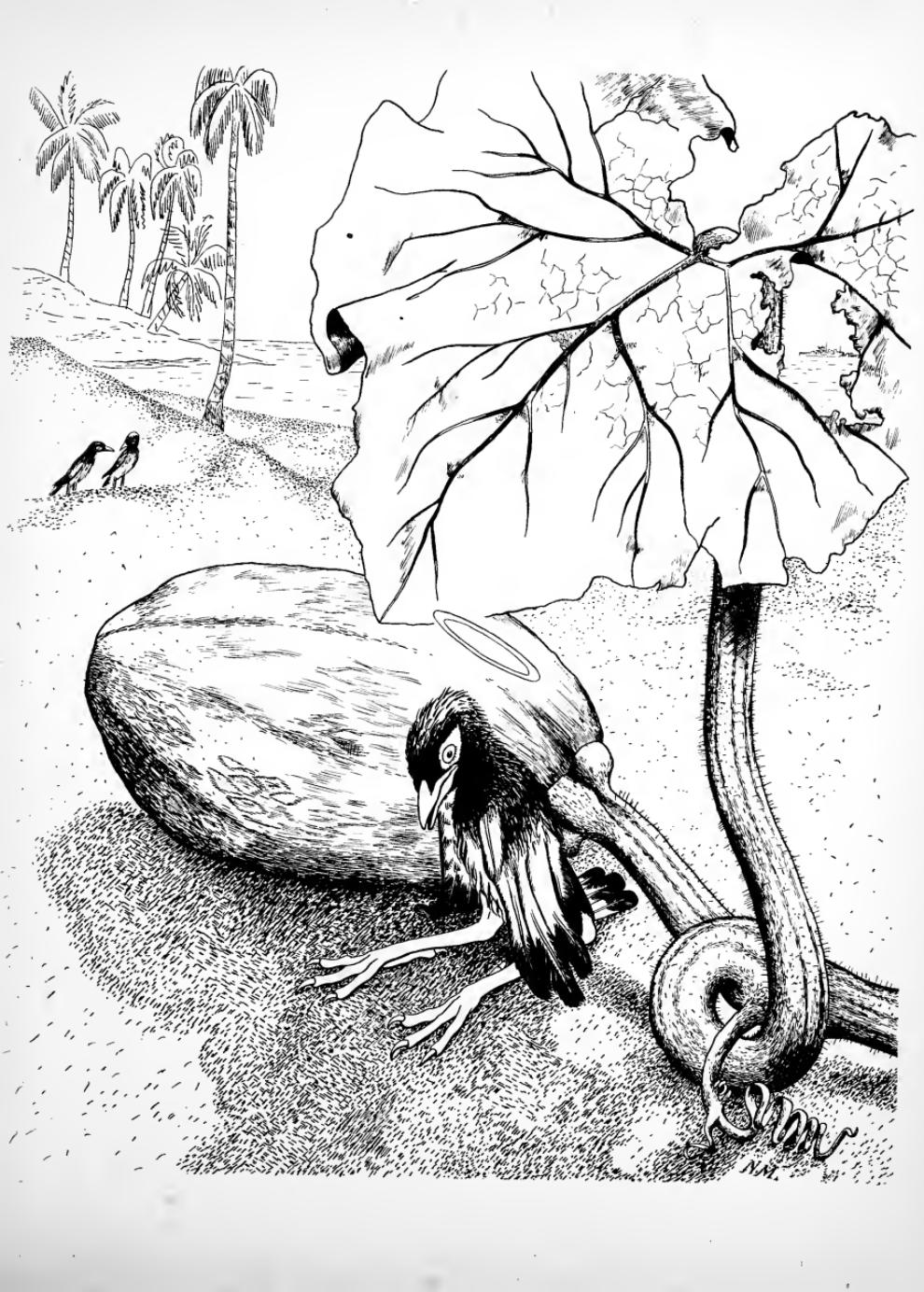
"Now," said his father, "you are going to see the world."

"You will return a different boy," his mother assured him.

"But I am already different," Pépé murmured.

"Never mind," she replied. "Come along; and don't scuff your feet so."

Pépé followed and in a little while they discovered Fati scratching his back against a post. Fati was a large pig belonging to Tané and Vahiné but, like many pigs, he was not content to root in his own yard. Every day Fati strolled far abroad, passing through many other plantations and usually getting back to Tané's place along about sundown. Fati's tour was very popular with the myna birds and today was no exception. The



minute Fati stopped scratching himself so many birds hopped aboard that there was not an inch of room left on his broad back.

"Oh dear!" mama wailed, "Where is my little Pépé to ride?"

"There is only one possibility," papa decided. "The tail." He turned to Pépé. "Up with you!"

Fati's tail was not much. There was only about five inches of it and in the middle it did a sudden cork-screw turn, but Pépé fluttered up and managed to get a grip. No sooner had he done so that Fati lumbered off heading for the boundary of Tané's land and for the wide world beyond.

Pépé's parents remained watching their little son grow smaller and smaller in the distance. "I wonder," said mama with a slight catch in her voice, "what he will be like when he comes back to us; he will have seen so much. . . ."

"Perhaps," papa observed, with his eyes still on the retreating pig, "Pépé will not see such a great deal after all. He looks very busy. Fati should hold his tail still!"

Fati then passed into a field of very tall grass so that he and all his passengers were lost to sight. Only a



small pinpoint of light floating over the tips of the grass showed where the grand tour was making its way —and that was Pépé's halo.

As Fati meandered on, the passengers, among whom were many old ladies, kept up a continual chatter. They craned their necks this way and that in order to miss none of the sights they passed, and they passed a great many.

In the plantation next door to Tané's they entered a beautiful grove of orange trees, then wound through a forest where tall coco palms stood in long, even rows as far as the eye could reach. Just beyond, in a green pasture, browsed a great beast with curling horns on its head and a sack underneath. "This," announced an elderly lady-myna who wished it known she had travelled before, "is a cow." Farther on they



came to an animal with long whiskers and a shaggy black and white coat who was munching an old newspaper. "And this," proclaimed the self-appointed guide, "is a goat." Everyone "oh-ed" and "ah-ed" a great deal and they all stared and stared. All except Pépé.

Pépé had no chance to look about because it took all his attention to keep his perch on Fati's tail. At one minute Fati would raise his tail so that Pépé was cocked at an alarming angle almost directly over the heads of the other tourists. Then, suddenly, the tail would go down so that Pépé could see nothing but one of Fati's excellent hams and a strip of the ground below. At other times the tail switched from side to side so fast that it made Pépé's head rattle and it was only by beating his wings furiously that he was able to keep his balance at all. The thoughtless pig's movements were often so abrupt that even the halo became rather badly askew.

No one spoke to Pépé except an old bird who was riding near the stern. This old fellow had a bad temper and he was known as Peg-leg because in place of his right leg he wore a wooden peg which Tané had whittled for him a good many years ago. While still

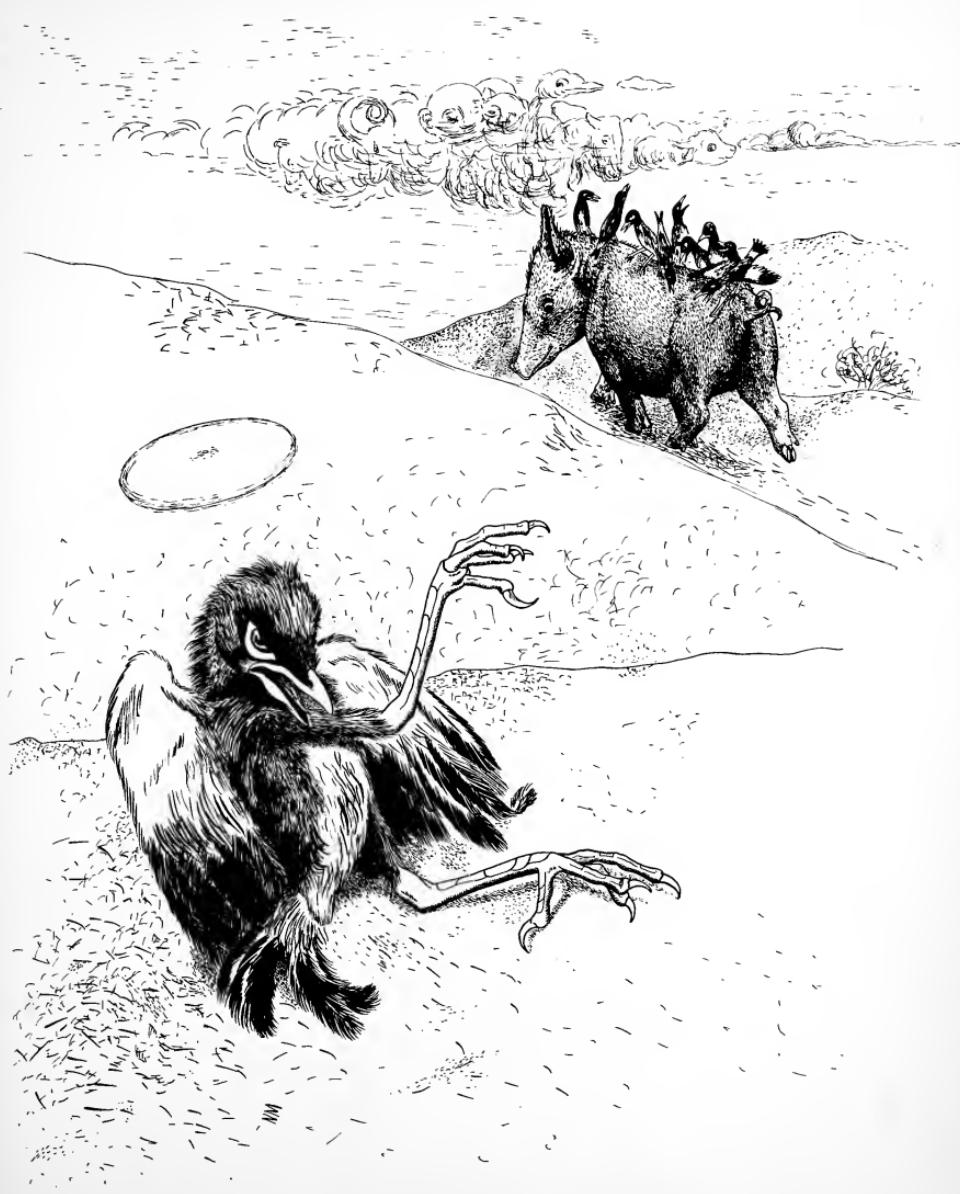


a young bird he had carelessly stepped into the hole of a land crab. The crab took his pincers and snipped off the leg and Peg-leg had been in an ill humor ever since.

For some time he watched Pépé struggling to stay aboard and then remarked testily, "Why can't you sit still and behave yourself?"

Pépé was unable to reply because Fati then did something he had not done before; he started his tail going round and round. It went faster and faster till at last Pépé was so dizzy he lost his grip entirely. He made several somersaults and then came down on the ground right on his back with his feet up in the air.

How all those myna birds did laugh! They laughed and hopped about so much that old Peg-leg came very near to falling off himself. But Fati kept on going as though nothing had happened — and Pépé was left behind.



Even a bird must feel a little bouyant to fly successfully. Pépé didn't feel bouyant. However, there was nothing for it but to get home. So he began trudging homeward afoot, dragging his wings on either side. His mind was so occupied with his troubles he never noticed a big horse in his path till he'd nearly walked right under it. It was almost four o'clock as he neared Tané's house and the mango beside it. His father and mother were on the ground sharing a fat wasp when mama spied him.

"Good gracious," she exclaimed, "it's Pépé!" She ran to him and began to smooth his ruffled feathers.



"Pépé! Whatever happened, darling? You're all mussed up. Tell mother all about it!"

Pépé was a bird of few chirps. "I crashed," he peeped . . . "on my tail."



Mama clucked sympathetically. But she looked preoccupied. Pépé seemed about as usual . . . a little tired, perhaps, and his halo bedraggled, though no more than normal wear and tear would account for . . . but however was she going to explain him to the neighbors this time! She was wishing she'd talked less about Pépé's trip abroad.

Pépé hung his head. He, too, realized disconsolately the Grand Tour, for him, had been a failure.

But a new day brings new courage. Each morning Pépé woke with the hope that the halo might have disappeared in the night. And although each morning he found that it hadn't, he would set forth with the idea that during *this* day something would happen to rid him of his shining, but unearned, badge of goodness. Still time passed and, quite in spite of himself, he kept right on being so angelic the other myna birds would hardly have been surprised to see him flit out of the mango tree carrying a harp.

On the morning of Independence day, however, Pépé woke with a sudden, fierce determination. He was going to take matters into his own hands; he was going to shake off that halo or die in the attempt. It was so early that not another bird was about. He swooped down into the yard before Tané and Vahiné's house and, backing up against one of the roots of the mango, he braced himself for a proper start. He counted to himself: "One, two, *three!*" Then off he scampered as if he were pursued by a dozen cats. He ran so fast that his little yellow legs were just a blurr, so fast that small whirlpools of dust rose behind him. He gave a quick, anxious glance over his shoulder. Of course no cats were following him . . . but cats



were not Pépé's problem. It was the halo—and there it was, sailing along, not a foot away. With a great scraping and scratching he doubled back and tore off in the opposite direction. When he stopped his chest was heaving. Slowly, hopefully, he turned his head and looked above. It was there.

But Pépé was not ready to give up; not yet. A dense thicket of brush grew at one side of Tané's house and Pépé had an idea. He let out one wild chirp and charged in. Recklessly he dodged and ducked, frantically he turned and twisted while the brambles clawed at his nice brown feathers. Then Pépé stepped out. Slowly, hopefully, he felt above his head with the tip of a wing. There it was.

Many people would have given up at this point. And Pépé, too, would surely have given up if he had valued his life very highly. But so far life, as you have seen, had not been much fun for Pépé. Anyway he was ready to risk it. He had never done much stunt-flying although often, with his heart in his mouth, he'd watched some of the daredevil mynas when they were showing off.



Pépé gave a great spring and shot into the air. He soared higher and higher above Tané's house; he went so high that Fati, standing beside his pen, looked no bigger than a land crab. At last he shut off the power and for a few moments drifted in quiet circles while he gazed sadly down on the beautiful world below. The sun was just peeping over the rim of the sea and it was throwing long shadows over the green island which had been Pépé's home. The glad, shrill calls of the myna birds awaking in the mango tree came to him very faintly and the sound was unlike anything he had ever heard before; it was like sweet, tinkly music. Tané and Vahiné were bending above a charcoal fire making their coffee, and Fati now moved over to his scratching-post before setting out on the Grand Tour. Pépé looked long at all these things because he knew he might never see them again and a little lump rose in his throat.

Finally he closed his eyes. He nosed down till he had gathered speed and then zoomed up for a wing-over. He did inside loops and outside loops; he did tight, vertical banks and Immelmann turns, whipstalls and snaprolls and barrelrolls. Certainly no man, and few birds, ever stunted as Pépé did that day. He spun and he fishtailed; he sideslipped with the nose up and



with the nose down and with the nose he knew not where. When he was almost exhausted he folded his wings tightly and taking Tané's roof for a target, he dove. Down, down he went—faster and faster till the wind shrieked in his ears. Tané's house grew bigger and bigger and nearer and nearer. Pépé had intended to pull out at the very last minute but when he tried to do so he found, poor bird, that he couldn't. He had lost control completely. On he plunged, smack into Tané's roof!

Fortunately the roof was made of palm fronds woven together and it was very soft. Pépé bored right into it. Vahiné, who had just brought the coffee pot inside, looked up startled and then she cried out in surprise, "Why—if it isn't my little angel!"

It was, indeed. There, sticking out of the thatch, up near the ridge pole, was Pépé's head—and Pépé's halo.



Pépé was standing once again on Tané's window sill where Vahiné had placed him. Without much appetite he was eating some bread crumbs which she had given him, but he was not badly hurt except for his feelings. He had been paying little attention to what was going on in the house because, although Tané and Vahiné were very kind, they had always seemed to Pépé rather like foreigners.

But now, all of a sudden, Tané and Vahiné began to make sounds which were very much like those that myna birds make when they are quarreling and Pépé pricked up his ears and looked at them. He saw that they were also behaving like myna birds—they were having an argument over a piece of paper! Pépé watched them enviously. How often he had wanted to join in when the birds were playing just such games!

Tané snatched the paper from Vahiné and then Vahiné snatched it back and all the while they were both talking and shouting at once.

“Give me that money, Tané!” Vahiné exclaimed. “You will only go and waste it on something needless!”

“No!” said Tané grabbing the colored bill from



her hand. "I got it for the sack of coconut I carried to town and I intend to spend it!"

"Never!" said Vahiné, taking it away from him. "I am going to put it in the empty butter tin for a rainy day!"

Pépé began to smile as he watched the pretty paper passing ever more rapidly from hand to hand and he started to hop up and down on the window sill with pleasure and excitement. When, a minute later, the bill accidentally slipped from Tané's grasp, Pépé's breath stopped. He watched it flutter to the floor at Tané's feet. Then it seemed to Pépé that his wings began to fly of their own accord and, before he realized what he was doing, he had swooped down, snapped up the piece of paper in his beak and disappeared out of the window.

Tané and Vahiné watched him go with their mouths open. They had stopped shouting at each other because there was no longer anything to quarrel about.

"Oh—oh," Vahiné faltered, "what has my little angel done? He's no better than any of the rest of them!"

"Done?" said Tané with a shrug of his shoulders,

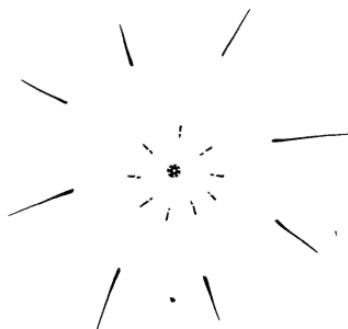


"I think he has saved us a lot of trouble." Then he laughed and stepping close to his wife he kissed her on the cheek. Vahiné smiled and kissed him back; it had not been very much money anyway.

"Yes," she agreed, "we were being very silly, weren't we? Quite like a couple of foolish birds!"

You might say that what Pépé had done was silly too—and probably it was. But it was ever so much fun. He had, of course, no idea what he had flown off with; to him it was only a bit of pretty, colored paper which fluttered in the wind as he went. Nor did he know just why he felt so gloriously happy. There was a reason though and it was this: at last Pépé was acting exactly like any myna that ever lived. As Vahiné had said, he was no better than any other little bird; but neither was he worse.

He had gone no more than a few yards from Tané's house when he heard a little "pop!" squarely over his head. It was the sort of sound a small soap bubble makes when it bursts. Pépé looked up—and the halo was gone!



He was so astonished that he came to an abrupt landing in the midst of a big crowd of his fellows. He expected them all to move away from him and to stare and point and titter as they always had before. They did nothing of the sort. One saucy bird saw the piece of paper in Pépé's mouth, snatched it and started to run away. Then a second bird seized it from the first, and a third from the second. Pépé dashed in wildly and got it back. And soon they were all chirping and squawking and fighting over Tané's paper bill. Pépé was right in the middle of the fray having the time of his life. But nobody knew him.



Nobody knew him from any other myna bird.
Pépé hardly knew himself!

